

Equal Opportunities for Professional Development: A Needs Assessment for a
Non-profit Professional Organization


by

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ABSTRACT

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) Twin Cities' chapter offers several opportunities for professional development. Distance members, defined as being approximately 20 miles from the meeting venue, do not have equal opportunities to participate in scheduled educational activities. This needs assessment identified satisfaction levels and recommendations for improvement in providing professional development opportunities for distance members.

One-hundred thirty-six Twin Cities distance members received a 20-question survey via e-mail. Though there was only a 13% response, overall, the results indicated that distance was an important factor in not attending local meetings and special programs. Though respondents had participated in professional development opportunities, they had not volunteered in leadership roles. Additional issues were related to cost of the programs (e.g., Webinars) and the content level related to years of

professional experience. Distance members indicated that they would participate in activities offered through virtual technology.

Recommendations from this study include benchmarking with other chapters and investigating volunteerism and motivation; however, one important recommendation includes creating an Education Committee to oversee professional development and investigate methods for providing distance members with easier access to professional development activities.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Background

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is one of the largest professional organizations in the world for technical writers. Founded in 1957, the STC is classified as an educational, non-profit organization that provides many opportunities for continuous professional development to its members. The organization is divided into geographic regions, with chapters in each state in the US and in many countries and cities in Europe and Asia. The society strongly promotes leadership and professional development in the field of technical communication, which includes, but is not limited to, technical writers, medical/science writers, editors, graphic designers, Web content developers, human factors professionals, instructional designers, and trainers (STC Website, 2006). Because the organization is declared an educational organization, professional development opportunities are available at the international, regional, and chapter levels.

The STC is a corporation, with bylaws, and governed by a Board of Directors at the international level; each chapter is also governed by an elected board. According to the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, the purpose of the society is

To engage in scientific, literary, and educational activities designed to advance the theory and practice of the arts and sciences of technical communication and to achieve this advance by holding meetings for reading and discussion of papers and by exchanging ideas, knowledge, philosophy, and techniques of these arts and sciences (2005).

Many colleges and universities offer degrees in Scientific and Technical Communication, including the University of Wisconsin —Stout. However, those who enter this technical field must keep up with cutting edge technologies and the latest tools of the

trade. As an example, technical communicators who graduated in the 1980s and early 1990s saw an enormous change in the tools needed to write documentation—all due to the evolution of the computer and development of the World Wide Web. After that, more and more documentation was created as “online.” Typewriters were discarded, and computerized word processing became the norm for developing printed documents, and then the process moved into electronic (online) documents. In addition document and content management are new systems created to control and track each version of the content. Technical communicators who worked for companies on limited budgets found themselves being “left behind.” It is not uncommon for employers to lack the funds to invest in the latest technologies, no matter the size of the company. Sadly, the technical communicator loses opportunities to stay current in emerging technologies. It is also very difficult for technical communicators to know absolutely every tool available to do their jobs or apply for new jobs. But, those skills can be developed through membership and volunteering in a professional organization such as STC. The networking opportunities are very valuable, and over the years, the professional organization has developed a very good reputation.

Starting in 2003, the international organization began a transformation, which is near completion. Now, members may belong to a chapter “affiliation” whether or not that chapter is actually close to where members live. As an example, the Twin Cities chapter has a member who actually works in Oregon. Chapters are called “communities,” which is not new, but the term is now used more frequently, and is synonymous with “chapter.” Committees at the international level have been created to disseminate information in all areas, including education and training. Special interest groups (SIGS), twenty-one of them, exist to help foster professional development in specialized areas (e.g., Usability, Scientific writing,

Project management, Online communication, Single sourcing, Marketing communications, etc.).

To meet the professional development needs of the STC members, opportunities abound at the international (also called society) level and chapter level. At the international level, there is an annual conference that rivals any professional conference. At the chapter level, regular programs are conducted that provide members with knowledge and experiences related to their field. The current, interim Strategic Plan (2006) says the organization will “publish and provide access to information to support the development of technical communication careers (p. 4).

The Twin Cities chapter conducts ten meeting/programs per year. The topics of the meetings are always applicable to some members with specific interests, and if planned accordingly, the topics will meet the needs of those in various career levels throughout the year. This provides for a mix of attendees at any given meeting, and allows people who do not normally attend the opportunity to attend a meeting at least once year. This is all fine for members who live close to the meeting location (which changes every few years to accommodate members who live in different areas of the cities), but it poses a problem for those members who live outside the Twin Cities area and where travel is not a safe option to attend a 2-hour meeting.

Description of the Problem

In the fall of 2005, the current president of the Twin Cities chapter contacted this researcher (a senior member of the STC) and asked for guidance to develop a plan to “reach” all members who reside a great distance from the Twin Cities with the purpose of providing professional development and leadership opportunities. Some of the members who live at a

distance would like to participate, but due to the constraint of distance, they miss out on some very important professional development opportunities.

Early in 2006, a member in Duluth, Minnesota inquired of the STC president about how she could attend a meeting that presented valuable information. The meeting was a lunchtime event, and Duluth is about a 4-hour drive from the meeting site. This is not the first time members have had such dilemmas, and with the advent of new telecommunications technology, it would be in the best interest of the Twin Cities chapter to develop a plan and process that would allow distance members to develop professionally through meetings, conferences, workshops, seminars, or any professional development/training/educational event.

The remainder of this chapter will contain a statement of the problem, objectives, and the significance of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Distance members of the Twin Cities STC Chapter have existed since the chapter formed in 1956. With today's technology, telecommuting is very easy, and many technical communicators find that they can live anywhere they want and work as freelancers, while others are employed in small businesses located in rural areas away from any metropolitan area. Although there has been concern for members who are unable to attend meetings and programs, the concern has not been great enough to solve the problem until now. With the advent of the recent organizational transformation, and the emphasis on education and professional development, it has become important to find out how the needs of distance members can be met. Currently, however, the Twin Cities chapter does not meet the professional development needs of its distance members.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the opportunities the Twin Cities chapter offers to its members and discover ways those opportunities can be improved to include distance members who belong to the Twin Cities “Community.” The objectives of the study are to:

1. Obtain information from distance members regarding their opinions and feelings about professional development opportunities within the Twin Cities community.
2. Analyze the needs assessment with respect to the respondents’ answers to the needs assessment survey.
3. Determine the best way(s) to meet the professional development needs of the distance members within the Twin Cities community.

This study is significant because it is pioneering in discovering how to meet the professional development needs of distance members. If the STC Bylaws state that the objective of STC is to promote and enhance education in the profession, and the Strategic Plan details a plan for developing professionals in the field, then the results of this study may provide answers to how all of that can be accomplished when distance members are involved. The recommendations from the results of this study may be applied to other chapters, and the Twin Cities chapter can be used as benchmark or model for other STC communities.

Assumptions of the Study

The assumptions of this study are:

1. Distance members may be aware of the professional development opportunities but choose not to participate for various reasons.

2. The Twin Cities chapter may assume that the programs and workshops are appropriate for all members.
3. Everyone surveyed will be a current STC member (using the most up-to-date membership list).
4. It is expected that needs for training will be identified regarding new technologies that may be introduced as a result of the survey findings.

Definition of Terms

Community. This is used in the sense of an STC community, and the definition provided here is intended to fit with the organization. Quesenbery (2006) provides an appropriate definition: "...a group of people who share common interests, activities, and initiatives; who communicate regularly; and who derive benefit from their association."

Professional Development. Specific skills required to maintain a career path or general skills that are offered through continuing education; developing skills relevant to a person's occupation (Wikipedia, 2006).

Society for Technical Communication. This is an "individual membership organization dedicated to advancing the arts and sciences of technical communication." (STC Web page, 2006)

Twin Cities Chapter. A community within the STC society; this is the headquarters for the Minnesota chapter within the Society for Technical Communication. The boundaries of the Twin Cities chapter consist of members in the Minneapolis/St. Paul and surrounding areas.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are:

1. The study was conducted with members of the Twin Cities chapter only and will not include members outside of this group.
2. The study does not include non-members in the profession who have attended meetings or programs in the past.
3. Only members who live outside of the Twin Cities metro area (approximately 20 mile radius) were surveyed.
4. Volunteerism is a large topic, and that is not addressed in this study.

There is no indication that the members who live outside of the Twin Cities have ever been surveyed or questioned regarding their needs for professional development. The findings will be important so that other chapters may follow the lead of the Twin Cities chapter and seek a needs assessment to determine what their distance members want regarding professional development opportunities.

Methodology

All 136 subjects selected for this study were listed as current members of the STC Twin Cities chapter, and they lived or worked outside the metro area (defined as ≥ 20 miles outside the central portion of the Twin Cities metro area).

Before developing questions for the data collection tool (survey), a focus group was conducted to establish the professional development opportunities available in the STC Twin Cities chapter. The 20-question survey was sent to subjects via an online survey tool; recipients were anonymous to each other. The survey was designed to provide answers in Likert scale, Yes/No, multiple selections, and open ended style. As an incentive to return the

survey, the researcher offered a gift certificate to Barnes and Noble. Respondents sent their names to a designated person, and one name was randomly selected to receive the gift certificate.

The survey was returned through the University of Wisconsin-Stout online survey tool (SelectSurveyASP). The system also performs simple data analysis (frequency counts and percents) and provides simple calculations. Data was exported from the survey tool into an Excel spreadsheet. Data analysis will involve analyzing for frequency counts and percents; results are displayed in graphs, charts, and tables.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This study is pioneering because there is no record of any empirical studies regarding the professional development concerns of distance members in STC chapters. However, the Society suggests surveying chapter (also known as communities) members periodically to determine the gaps in what the chapter offers and what members think should be offered for professional development opportunities.

There are specific articles written about professional development; therefore, this literature review will include material for professional development, communities in professional organizations and how they foster professional development, distance education, and methods for adopting new technologies related to distance learning.

Professional Development

Defining professional development is complex; however, Casey and Tobin provide a clear, thoughtful definition derived from their own professional development literature review:

Professional development, or continuing professional education (CPE), is a subset of adult learning...First, professionals must master, and then maintain, a specific body of knowledge that is specific to their profession...professionals tend to be skillful and autonomous learners who will select and complete only those learning activities they feel are relevant and important to their professional practice (p. 2).

Casey and Tobin explain that adults take control of their own learning and bring a “vast reservoir of life experience and prior knowledge...and they rely on this experience as a resource to learn new things” (p. 1).

Cervero (2000) examines four trends that he says changed continuing education in the last decade of the 20th century. One trend involves the role of professional organizations and professional development: “Universities and professional associations are active and important providers, with an increasing number of programs being offered in distance education formats.” Cervero goes on to say that, “Professional associations are also major providers of continuing education. In fact, education is a major if not the primary function of associations” (p.4). These statements are in alignment with the transformation and focus on professional development that the STC has implemented internationally.

In the STC Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, Article 2D states that the purpose of the organization is “To advance the arts and sciences of technical communication in order to promote the public welfare through the development of better educated personnel in the field of technical communication” (p. 4). This means that every member has the opportunity to grow professionally through provided meetings and programs delivered through chapter or international level activities. Since the recent organizational transformation, STC chapters became known as communities—a term used occasionally in the past, but now used consistently in place of “chapters.” According to Article IX of the STC Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, community presidents need to “ensure regular development and presentation of programming of value to the membership (examples include, but are not limited to ,informational presentations at face-to-face meetings or via electronic means, listservs for information exchange, and publications)” (Section 4E1, p. 14).

In a reported case study regarding professional development in a Florida STC community, authors Lippincott and Voss (2001) believe that ongoing professional

development is important for those in the profession of technical communication and therefore “it is vital that the Society for Technical Communication give the subject the attention it deserves (p. 449). The STC chapter in Orlando, Florida maintains an Educational Committee that fosters professional development for members. Members of the committee are available to offer support to other chapters in helping them provide professional development opportunities. The authors of the report go on to say that “...in a profession that is inextricably linked to technology, continuous professional development is not a luxury, it is an essential” (p.459). Janicko (2000) explains that though most professionals need professional development and continual learning, technical communicators are in a field where technology changes rapidly, so they need “continual learning to keep up with both new technology and changes in the workplace environment” (p. 7).

Janicko explains that the role of a technical communicator is defined as “building bridges between those who have information and those who need to use information,” so technical communicators are always in “learning mode” (p. 9). Continuing education or professional development is one way to be ready for the next job or keep up with the latest technologies. But what can organizations do to make sure professional development opportunities are always available, and how can members show they have participated in any programs?

Some professional organizations are on the cutting edge when it comes to providing professional development to its members. In 2005, the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) introduced their Professional Development Certificate (Klein, 2005). Members earn points for participating in selected activities. The list of qualifying activities is extensive but a sampling includes: attending meetings, non-credit workshops (AMWA has a certificate

program for writing specialties), non-AMWA conferences (such as STC), writing chapters in a published book, leading or co-leading workshops at conferences, editing chapters of a book, editing or writing a book with more than 100 pages, and teaching relevant university-level courses (p. 86). To qualify for a certificate, AMWA members need to earn 50 points, where certain activities are assigned a “points” value, and verify that the activity was completed (p.85). This is a very organized method for providing professional development in a specialized field—medical writing. And, the certificate idea can be very motivating to members who need a little nudge to encourage continuous learning.

Within the STC, there are numerous opportunities for members to participate in professional development activities. At the Society level, the Annual conference (now known as Summit) presents many workshops and lectures under such “tracks” as Developing and Delivering Content, Producing and Publishing Information, Developing Your Skills, and Promoting Your Profession. These sessions provide ample opportunity for members to enhance their professional development. However, like many professional conferences, they are expensive once the transportation, lodging,

In larger chapters (more than 300 members), professional development initiatives may be the province of a separate committee. Lippincott & Voss (2001) reported that the Chicago chapter created the Institute for Professional Development to develop partnerships between academic institutions and practicing professionals. The Institute serves as a model for other chapters to partner with their local technical communication faculty (p. 459). With several models available, and the support of the Society level leaders, the Twin Cities chapter could entertain the possibility of starting a professional development program.

Quesensberry (2005) stated that those in technical communication careers today need to engage in “continual growth and learning as jobs, technologies, and the disciplines evolve” (p.27). In this career alone, professionals have seen the technology evolve from typewriters to word processors to hypertext information (p. 27).

In “Four Tips for Professional Development,” Dimick (2002) suggests that STC members: “Take advantage of your membership benefits. You have a wealth of information at hand: meetings and conferences, magazines and journals, Web sites, and a network of people doing the same thing as you are!”(p. 9). This suggests that the leadership in STC communities and that the members need take on the challenge of incorporating newer technology that is available for distance learning. Such an undertaking can only be successful if there are motivated participants—both in leadership and in membership.

Motivation is a keyword here. Members of any chapter need to be motivated to participate in professional development opportunities. However, discussing motivation is beyond the scope of this needs assessment. The STC Chapter Handbook (2004) describes major volunteer opportunities for members in any community. Major opportunities discussed in this study include: monthly programs; job exchange; newsletter; publication competition; awards banquet/recognition; Web site; special interest groups (SIGs); Webinars/seminars/workshops; networking; and membership drive.

Monthly programs

Quality programs held monthly can be designed to satisfy the professional development needs of members in various jobs. The quality draws in the membership, so volunteers for a Program committee to plan programs can come from various job sectors, such as information technology, scientific, medical, manufacturing, and computer science, to name

only a few. This diversity provides educational/professional development needs for diverse members (p. 3-2). And, those who volunteer develop professionally as leaders. Quality programs are just some of the tools needed to provide professional development. One of the issues in this study is to determine how often distance members attend monthly meetings. In general, the meetings are at set times, on set days, and in one location. This can contribute to any difficulty distance members may have attending meetings.

Job Exchange

When a community offers an employment program, members are at an advantage when searching for jobs. Technical communicators rely on each other for contacts, and it is the one profession where people competing for jobs will actually share information. “The employment information committee serves as a liaison service to help job seekers and employers contact one another and provides information about available jobs and people who are actively job hunting” (STC Handbook, 2004, p. 8-1). This program always needs a leader because managing this service requires adept computer skills. Participating in this service provides a professional development opportunity for using online tools and communicating with hiring managers and human resource personnel in a professional manner. The Job Exchange is a valuable program for STC members, especially for distance members, because they can post jobs or find jobs using this service. The service is free, but in recent years the Job Exchange has become available to members only. The program does require excellent management because it is important to keep job postings current and correct.

Newsletter/Newsletter Editor

As far as professional opportunities, working with the newsletter offers multiple professional development tools. Volunteers can be anything from the Managing Editor, to

Designer, Contributing Writer, Advertising manager, proofreader, or photographer. According to the STC Handbook, “each member of the newsletter staff should be mentioned in the masthead” (p 7-3). What a wealth of experience one can get from volunteering for one of the positions related to the newsletter. And, again, the job can be done from a distance because of the e-mail and the Internet. With a role on the newsletter committee, a member can gain experience writing, managing a budget, or learning sophisticated online tools.

The newsletter editor has extensive opportunities for professional development. To summarize the Newsletter section of the STC Handbook (2004), an editor writes articles and recruits other members to write articles. The editor is responsible for the content and publication of the newsletter, including the quality of the content. Editors have opportunities to communicate with other chapter newsletter editors, and they can share creative ideas (p. 1-9). Those who write articles can share expertise, knowledge, and opinions to a whole community. Professional development like this is not always available in an industry job. Again with the advancements in technology, a distance member could become newsletter editor and learn the processes for publishing material online.

Publication competition

Most of the STC communities, internationally, conduct a publication competition. Many also include technical art and online communication in the competition. Generally, communities exchange competition entries, ensuring a fair judging session since it is rare that any of the entries will involve a conflict of interest. Judges volunteer to review entries and assign points according to specific criteria. Professional development occurs because judges have the opportunity to view excellent work from industry. Judges can provide a peer-review and offer sound, constructive advice or praise for the work. If judges have more experience,

then most often they provide constructive criticism for improvement. Both entrants and judges share professional development opportunities.

According to the Handbook for Competition Managers (2006):

The local and regional competitions are designed primarily to recognize outstanding efforts of individuals. The added benefits include:

- Establishing professional standards for our work
- Providing visibility for the profession
- Adding to chapter revenues to help sponsor other activities
- Creating leadership, volunteer, and training opportunities
- Providing a forum for sharing ideas and approaches to new technologies and learning from them (p. 6)

Although entering the competition and managing the competition are important for professional development opportunities, judging in the competition is most rewarding. Some communities offer training sessions for judging. The Twin Cities chapter has been offering training for at least 8 years. Training provides consistent judging tactics and makes the process easier for teams. Chapter leader Anna-Marie Grassino, interviewed for a recent society leader's newsletter, *Tieline* (2006), identified one of many tips for conducting training sessions: "When making up the judging teams, we identify new versus experienced judges and try to get an experienced judge or two on each team...that way we're using experienced judges as mentors to the new judges" (p. 5). Again, this activity is a good choice for professional development, and there is already training involved! Judging is not merely subjective, either, because carefully developed criteria are used to assess the entry. In

addition, the criteria can be used in developing technical communication—and this is especially useful for junior or entry level professionals.

Awards Banquet/Recognition

This event is often an individual community choice; however, the Twin Cities community holds one each year to honor those competition entrants who earned high ratings for their work. All of the winning entries are on display and provide examples to members of high quality work. Managing this event is not as time-consuming as other events, but the quality of the event is important because it does honor those who work hard at their professions. The banquet is a professional development opportunity and often attended by members who do not regularly attend meetings or other growth and development events. Volunteers gain project management experience and communication skills. Often, a guest speaker from the list of high profile STC members will honor everyone with an appropriately selected presentation. This event is an excellent opportunity for networking and meeting members who only attend once a year.

Web site

The Web site is the communication pathway to the community members. To show off some very savvy Web design and usability, the Twin Cities recently redesigned their Web site. This took the gutsy move of a student in Technical Communication and the desire to do something worthwhile as a volunteer for the chapter and gain valuable experience in the long run. Today, there are many standards that guide Web development and usability. One is the W3C—the World Wide Web Consortium—and this organization develops standards for presenting information on the Web, including allowing graphics and icons to be recognized by viewers who may have vision limitations. To volunteer for this professional development is to

gain experience in Web design, writing, style, usability testing, and a formatting language—HTML, XML, etc. With the variety of tasks performed on a job related to technical communication, it is good to have some background in Web development. And, the cost of gaining such experience within STC is free. In addition, anyone who volunteers for the position can do the job remotely. However, for the student who redesigned the Web pages, the experience in professional development will certainly pay off when it is time to search for a permanent job.

Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

Members of a community have the option to join a special interest group, or SIG. Because of the popularity of this part of the STC membership, the society developed The STC Special Interest Group Handbook (2001) regarding the development and maintenance of a SIG. The introduction of the Handbook provides a concise explanation of the value of a SIG:

STC's Special Interest Groups (SIGs) are composed of STC members with common experiences and interests who share their skills and knowledge with each other and with other STC members. Some of these interests are based on the type of work members do. Other interests may reflect a personal desire to learn or share particular expertise.

As interest increases in a technology area or topic, this momentum sometimes results in the formation or growth of a SIG. As a SIG develops, it changes to meet the needs of its specific membership and the general membership of the Society. SIGs contribute to the Society by acting as “think tanks” that steer the Society in new directions (p. 1).

The SIGs are at the society level, not only the chapter (local) level, and managers exist at both levels, making this activity susceptible to distance management and “attendance.”

Managing a SIG involves strategic planning, budgeting, offering educational topics for meetings, developing a newsletter (generally online these days), and developing a Web site—just to name a few of the responsibilities necessary for managing a successful SIG. The experience gained in managing a SIG is not unlike the experience of supervising a department of technical communicators. Supervisors generally prepare reports detailing how goals are met during the course of a year; according to the SIG Handbook, the STC leadership requires an update report, again providing sound development experience to volunteers. These experiences and skills are certainly transferable to on-the-job responsibilities.

Webinars, seminars, and workshops

Members have the opportunity to attend Webinars, seminars, and workshops, depending on the chapter program scheduling, for professional development beyond local meetings. Webinars, according to the international STC Web site (2006), are seminars that members can attend via a “teleconference” system. In addition, a presentation can be projected so several people can attend the Webinar and share the fee. Attendees do not have to travel, for example, if there is department or group of writers in an organization; all can attend the Webinar.

Seminars are generally presentations where members travel to a location to attend the event. However, with the emergence of Webinars, seminars have taken on a different venue. One community in the STC is a shining example of how seminars work for their members: the Transalpine Chapter, which encompasses communities in Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Switzerland, and Italy. On the Transalpine chapter Web site (2006), there are announcements

advertising the Webinars/Seminars that have headline speakers who normally draw a huge audience when presenting at a large gathering. Again, this is an opportunity to participate as a learner or as a leader/teacher.

Workshops offer hands-on information where attendees can actually practice tasks delivered in the presentation. Learning that takes place can be put into practice on-the-job soon after the workshop. In February 2006, The Twin Cities chapter provided a workshop that dealt with delivering training that is more interesting and actually fun (Fredrickson Communications, Inc., 2006). The presenters provided handouts and for several months maintained a link on their company Web site. Though it is more difficult to attend a workshop, which can be a half-day or full-day event, it is common for workshops to be held on a weekend, making traveling more desirable.

The STC community is bursting with professional development opportunities. Serious members who live at a distance can stay current with the latest technologies if they choose to participate in these opportunities. Like good members of a village or small town, members can have a sense of community—a professional community. But, exactly what is a professional community and what are the boundaries?

Professional Community

During the STC transformation, it was important to identify and define “community.” Quesenbery (2005) identified community in the realm of STC as “...a group of people who share common interests, activities, and initiatives; who communicate regularly; and who derive benefit from their association” (p. 26). STC members keep with the challenges of their profession through education and membership in professional communities. The organization offers special interest groups (SIGs) for specialized areas of technical communication. An

example of SIGs include: Instructional design, Consulting and Independent Contraction, International Technical Communication, Marketing Communication, Scientific Communication, and others. In 2004, 43% of STC members belonged to at least one SIG community (Quesenbery, p. 28). Many members belong to more than one SIG, which enhances their opportunities for professional development.

Now in the 21st century, Quesenbery suggests that many of the STC communities “are virtual and must be sustained without the support of regular face-to-face meetings” (p. 29). Most corporations are global, and there are virtual teams that function successfully with the use of today’s tools and technology. STC members have the opportunity to learn these tools either at work or through the professional organization. These learning opportunities foster professional development. However, members need to know about the opportunities and be willing to participate.

STC as an international organization is known as a “learning community,” and community members do have a responsibility, globally. Throughout the global communities, each one nurtures members who have fewer skills and less knowledge than more senior members. At an international STC conference presentation, Porter (2001) said that “the emphasis of a successful learning community is mutual cooperation and sharing.”

Communities are commissioned to offer professional development, and in 2004, STC president Andrea Ames requested in her monthly column that communities “recharter” by assessing their professional development opportunities and improving how “...we define and demonstrate the value of our communities, and the consistency of members’ experience across communities” (Ames, 2004, p. 2). Ames continued to explain that leaders in the

communities have a responsibility to members to ensure that “their community consistently meets members’ needs” (p. 2).

How does a community support professional development for its members? In the Society’s Strategic Plan for 2000 – 2005, one of the objectives was to “charge the Society to ‘improve educational opportunities for technical communication” (Lippincott and Voss, 2001, p. 449). The Interim Strategic Plan (2006) stated: “STC needs to provide continuing education for its members, but currently only offers brief topics in the Webinar format. We need to provide additional venues for educational opportunities, such as live instruction, Webinar instruction, and e-learning instruction for practicing technical communicators” (p. 12).

Community and professional development go hand-in-hand. STC chapters are faced with the challenge of providing professional development to members of their community who live at a distance. Quesenbery (2005) stated that “some communities might be based on ‘were I live,’ but others connect members based on shared industry, types of product..., their business relationships....their tools...”(p. 27).

Even though members share commonalities, is there a difference in value received for members participating in a local meeting versus members who attend a virtual meeting? The next section will include some very interesting information from a study conducted at Sun Microsystems in 2000.

Ways to Enhance Professional Development in Distance Communities

In 2000, Sun Microsystems conducted a study of groups located in various “geographical locations and that had well-established practices” for meeting regardless of where they were located (Henderson & Henderson, 2000, p. 48). Researchers in that study

observed the established practices to discover what worked for the groups, and what did not.

In defining the parameters of the study, Henderson defined local meeting places as “conceptual locations within which a meeting occurs” (p. 48). In other words, the meeting place was a “concept” whether participants gathered in conference rooms, remained at their desks, or called from home (p. 49). A meeting also had a start and stop time. “Ideally, a distance meeting would provide experience just like being present in a local meeting. In reality, however, the addition of distance technologies to communication media changes things radically” (p. 49). Henderson goes on to say, “The task of holding meetings is work and requires skill. As part of membership in a working group, people develop meeting skills of considerable complexity and sophistication” (p. 49). If STC distance members lack meeting skills on the job, then attending or participating in distance meetings can help provide skills that can be transferred to the working environment.

If professional development is to take place within a community, and that community is “spread out” where members cannot come together in one meeting place, then it is feasible to think of holding collaborative meetings where members participate from their respective places. Up until a few years ago, meetings were held in one place, and members converged in that one place. But, according to Kaplan-Leiserson (2003) “with the advent of videoconferencing, collaboration software, the Internet and other technologies, the idea of place is being replaced” (p. 12). Thus, the community is wherever like-minded members gather to learn what is important to their professional development.

Within the last few years, STC has implemented a Webinar series. Ames (2005) states in her monthly Intercom column:

If you look at the STC Web site, you will see that STC already offers education in the form of conferences and remote (telephone and Web-based) seminars. These conferences and seminars are some of the most successful programs that the Society sponsors. Through the education transformation initiative, STC will capitalize on what we already do well and improve educational offerings for the technical communication community. Education is one of STC's key values, and this year the education transformation committee is developing the strategy that will take STC's valuable conference and telephone seminar programs to the next level of educational leadership, including content to help members identify and then learn what they need to know to make strategic contributions (p. 2).

The STC transformation has brought professional development to forefront of the organization's mission. Recently, a new Education department was developed to foster education and professional development, and the executive director, Susan Burton, announced the Director of Education on October 30, 2006. According to the broadcast e-mail, the new director will be responsible for promoting education from the international conference to e-learning. This means professional development will be important from the international society level to the community level.

Members expect value for their membership dollars. According to Ames (2004), "existing communities are "rechartering"—examining and demonstrating their value to members" (p. 2). Members need to express their needs, and if they do not, it's a good idea for the chapter leaders to ask members what they want. That is part of the purpose of this research—what do distance members want? Two chapters outside of the United States

answered that question: The Transalpine chapter in Europe, and the India chapter in Bangalore.

The Transalpine community spans five European countries, and they rely on the Web and use technologies to the max when “meeting.” Rather than hold regular meetings, according to their Web site, they meet in a different country just a few times a year to present a seminar or conference. In between meetings, their key goals were to provide career development opportunities in the form of coaching, multiple volunteer positions, and encouraging volunteers to present at meetings, and provide a Web site that has a European-wide job bank. In addition, the chapter strives to “be a model for covering a large geographical area and a culturally diverse group of people. Due to their geographical position, they also want to foster “inter-chapter cooperation” (STC Transalpine Web site).

In India, technical communicators in five areas (Pune, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Chennai) conduct Learning Sessions in those cities (STC India Web site). In personal e-mail communication February 12, 2006 with an STC India chapter member, Shankar remarked that often meetings are based on whatever information is available at the time. But, presentations are delivered with PowerPoint, and those slides are posted on the community’s Web site. This allows easy access to the information and provides learning opportunities for all members. In addition, this method promotes solid volunteerism where members have the chance to present in their area of expertise.

The Twin Cities STC community does offer several opportunities for members to develop professionally. However, at best, the chapter offers the basics for professional development; but, is that enough? There is very little information or research that singles out the distance members. Most research is related to the membership as a whole, and that is why this study is important because it focuses on the distance member who might be at a disadvantage for having equal opportunities to develop professionally.

Chapter III: Methodology

In this chapter, the researcher details the methods used to gather data for the needs assessment. The purpose of the needs assessment is to determine how the STC Twin Cities chapter (community) can better provide professional development opportunities to its members. The quantitative data collection format will include a survey. Methodology includes subject selection and description, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations.

Subject Selection and Description

All subjects selected to receive the survey were listed as current members of the STC Twin Cities chapter, and they live outside the metro area (defined as ≥ 20 miles outside the central portion of the Twin Cities metro area). The researcher obtained the most recent membership list from the Society for Technical Communication, International office in Alexandria, Virginia. There are about 550 members affiliated with the Twin Cities chapter, with 140 members identified as living outside the metro area. There are 44 members who live outside the state of Minnesota and claim the Twin Cities chapter as its community. Four of the members did not provide an e-mail address to the international office when membership was renewed; therefore, the survey was sent to 136 members.

Instrumentation

A Focus Group was conducted February 27, 2006 to gather qualitative data that would provide information for developing survey questions (see Appendix A).

Quantitative data was collected via a 20-question survey. The survey was developed to include demographics and satisfaction with current programs and benefits offered through the Twin Cities STC chapter. There are questions that require answers using a Likert Scale and

rank-order. The survey included closed-ended questions, and subjects had the opportunity to provide comments for some of the open-ended questions. The survey was sent via the UW-Stout Survey tool.

The survey was developed after the Focus group discussion responses had been categorized. Questions for the survey came from the categories. An expert in the field of survey development assisted with formulating the questions and deciding the scoring format. The researcher pilot tested the survey with several members of the STC Twin Cities executive board members. There were limited comments, but changes were incorporated if they were relevant and improved the survey. Some questions were re-worded as suggested by the expert. The advice was that the result of each question should lead to a new procedure or process. An incentive was offered to recipients: a \$50.00 gift certificate to Barnes and Noble bookstore. Those who returned the survey sent their name to a third party who was also responsible for randomly choosing a name from a hat.

Data Collection Procedures

After the researcher obtained IRB approval, the 20-question survey was sent to 136 subjects via the University of Wisconsin-Stout online survey tool (SelectSurveyASP). This allowed for anonymous returns and minimal data analysis that was built into the survey tool. Recipients were given 7 days to answer and respond to the survey. Four days after the survey was sent, the researcher sent a follow-up reminder e-mail to the distribution list; however, efforts to retrieve the e-mail have been unsuccessful. At the close of the survey, data was transferred (exported, not manually entered) to an Excel[®] spreadsheet. All surveys were deleted from the online tool at the completion of this thesis. Statistical results were acquired with the use of Excel. Results are displayed as frequency counts and percents.

Limitations

There were many, many issues discussed at the Focus group meeting, and it was not possible to include everything in this particular study with respect to survey questions. Other than scheduling the survey for pilot tests, there was no validation procedure put into place. After the survey was distributed, it occurred to the researcher that motivation plays a big role in how much effort members will put forth regarding helping themselves with respect to professional development. Having data regarding volunteerism and motivation may have had an effect on the results and final conclusions. It is possible that those who received surveys had either moved from the residents or jobs that were provided to the researcher through the Society for Technical Communication international headquarters.

Summary

The results of this study may influence the Twin Cities STC board members regarding professional development opportunities. To this researcher's knowledge, no other chapter has formally surveyed the distance population to gain an understanding of their needs. It is feasible that the results of this study will be important to other chapters that face the task of meeting the professional development needs of distance members.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the opportunities the Twin Cities chapter offers to its members and discover ways those opportunities can be improved to include distance members who belong to the Twin Cities “Community.” The objectives of the study were to:

1. Obtain information from distance members regarding their opinions and feelings about professional development opportunities within the Twin Cities community.
2. Analyze the needs assessment with respect to the respondents’ answers to the needs assessment survey.
3. Determine the best way(s) to meet the professional development needs of the distance members within the Twin Cities community.

On February 27, 2006, the researcher met with a focus group that consisted of seven STC members of the Twin Cities chapter. The topic of discussion included professional development along with values of membership and what the chapter and society levels offer members. The results, captured on a SmartBoard and transcribed, are in Appendix A. Due to the nature of a focus group, the results are not explained in this section because the focus group was a method to brainstorm and list the many professional development opportunities within the STC organization.

The remainder of this chapter explains the results of a 20-question survey distributed to 136 distance members on September 18, 2006. Results are reported question by question. Twenty-four members returned surveys; however, 6 surveys were discarded because they did not meet the distance criteria. Therefore, results are based on 18 returned surveys for a low response rate (13%), which was unexpected.

Question 1: How many miles do you travel to attend a monthly meeting?

This was a two-part question regarding distance from meeting place to home, and meeting place to work. Not all of the respondents met the criteria of being approximately 20 miles from the meeting venue. This could have been due to respondents moving or changing jobs and not updating their address with the STC office. Two respondents entered “do not attend” instead of mileage; another two respondents entered “2” miles for Home, while one of those entered 80 miles for Work. The graph (see Figure 1) shows both distances for Home and Work, but the data only includes those who met the distance criteria. Two respondents were just under the 20-mile limit, but the actual criteria was describes as “approximately” 20 miles, so they were included in the analysis. Overall, 18 respondents met the distance criteria. With respect to meeting location and distance from home or work, surveyed members who met the criteria averaged 142 miles from home and 154 miles from work.

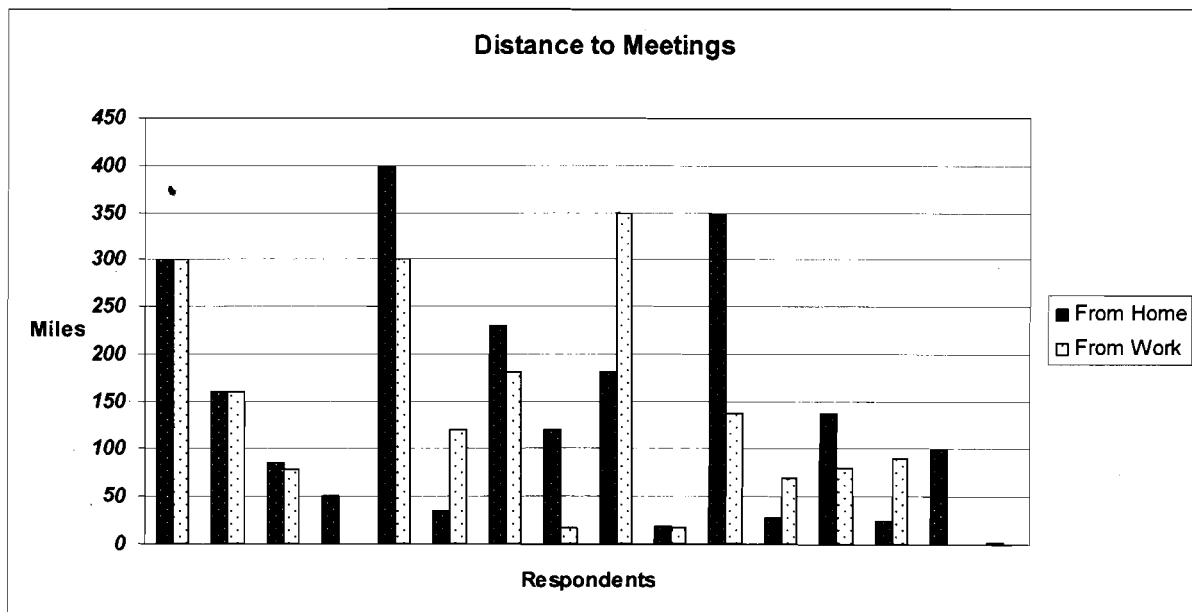


Figure 1. Distance to meetings shown from either home or work.

Question 2: To what extent is distance the deciding factor for attending Twin Cities chapter activities (meetings, workshops, Webinars)?

For this question, 88% (n = 16) of the respondents said that distance was at least a significant or very significant factor in attending chapter activities. One respondent who traveled 50 miles indicated that distance was insignificant.

Do you have high speed access to the Internet?

For this Yes/No question, 89% (n = 16) of the respondents indicated that they had high speed Internet. This result is important because for quick access to the Internet, a high-speed connection is essential, especially for watching streaming video or long presentations. Those who do not have high speed Internet live closest to the meeting venue.

Question 3: Please check the following growth and development opportunities in which you may have participated. Please check all that apply.

Despite distance issues, respondents have participated in many of the growth and development opportunities offered in the Twin Cities chapter. However, note that overall they have not participated in volunteer activities whether in a leadership or non-leadership capacity. This indicates that distance is an issue when it comes to taking part in leadership roles, which can in themselves be excellent professional development opportunities. See Table 1 for the number of respondents who have participated in events, and whether anyone experienced a role in leadership opportunities. Respondents could have participated in any combination of activities, marking more than one item in a row if necessary. Since the overall response number is low, the researcher chose to display only frequency counts, and not percents, in Table 1.

Table 1. Participation in growth and development opportunities

Growth and Dev. Opportunities	Level of Participation					Total
	Part.	Never part.	Vol. non- leadership role	Vol. leadership role	Need more info.	
Monthly Programs	11	7	0	1	0	19
Job Exchange	3	14	0	0	0	17
Newsletter	9	8	0	0	0	17
Pubs Competition	7	7	4	1	0	19
Awards Banquet	7	10	1	1	0	19
Web site	9	7	0	1	0	17
Spec. Interest Groups	12	6	0	0	0	16
Webinars	8	9	0	0	0	17
STC Phone Seminars	5	12	0	0	0	17
Seminars/Workshops	11	7	1	1	0	20
Networking	7	8	1	0	0	16
Membership Drive	0	17	0	0	0	17

Question 5: Please indicate your level of satisfaction for each of the following professional development opportunities and services offered in the chapter.

The results in Table 2 indicate that overall, members were satisfied with growth and development opportunities offered in the Twin Cities chapter. However, the results also indicate that a large percentage of respondents are neutral in their satisfaction level with the opportunities offered.

Table 2. Satisfaction levels rated

Growth and Dev. Opportunities	Level of Satisfaction					Total
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	
Monthly Programs	6% (1)	28% (5)	56% (10)	11% (2)	0% (0)	18
Job Exchange	11% (2)	28% (5)	61% (11)	0% (0)	0% (0)	18
Newsletter	17% (3)	50% (9)	22% (4)	11% (2)	0% (0)	18
Pubs Competition	11% (2)	44% (8)	39% (7)	6% (1)	0% (0)	18
Awards Banquet	6% (1)	11% (2)	83% (15)	0 (0%)	0% (0)	18
Web site	22% (4)	44% (8)	28% (5)	6% (1)	0% (0)	18
Spec. Interest Groups	17% (3)	17% (3)	61% (11)	6% (1)	0% (0)	18
Webinars	11% (2)	11% (2)	78% (14)	0% (0)	0% (0)	18
STC Phone Seminars	6% (1)	17% (3)	72% (13)	0% (0)	6% (1)	18
Seminars/Workshops	11% (2)	39% (7)	39% (7)	11% (2)	11% (2)	18
Networking	11% (2)	17% (3)	72% (13)	0% (0)	0% (0)	18
Membership Drive	6% (1)	11% (2)	83% (15)	0% (0)	0% (0)	18

Question 6 : Check all of the determining factors that are important reasons (to you) for belonging to the Twin Cities chapter (check all that apply).

Of all the reasons checked, the top three reasons for belonging to STC included networking, special interest groups , and workshops/seminars. The least important reason selected was for leadership opportunities (see Figure 2).

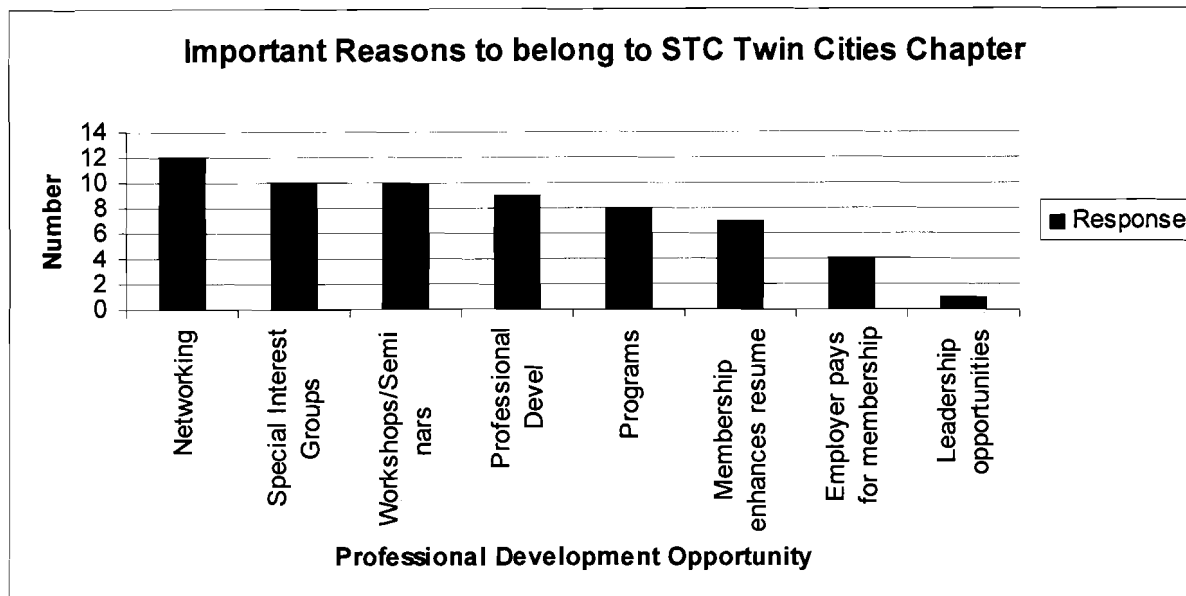


Figure 2. Ranked reasons for belonging to STC

For this question, respondents could also add their own reasons, and seven people chose to make comments (see Appendix C). The comments were not edited and appear as entered in the survey tool; however, the comments echoed the same reasons listed on the questionnaire.

Question 7: Are you aware of the Twin Cities annual competition?

The number of entries in the competition has been low the last few years, so it was important to ask this question. Eighty-nine percent ($n = 16$) of the respondents are aware of the competition; however, in Question 4, only six respondents indicated that they had ever participated in the competitions.

Question 8: Indicate how you have participated in the Publication Competition.

In hindsight, this question is very similar to an option offered in Question 4. However, in answering this question, 44% ($n = 8$) of the respondents indicated that they have not participated; in comparison to Question 4, where 41% ($n = 7$) of the respondents indicated that they have not participated in the publication competition. Only one of the respondents had participated as both entrant and judge. Figure 3 displays the distribution of responses.

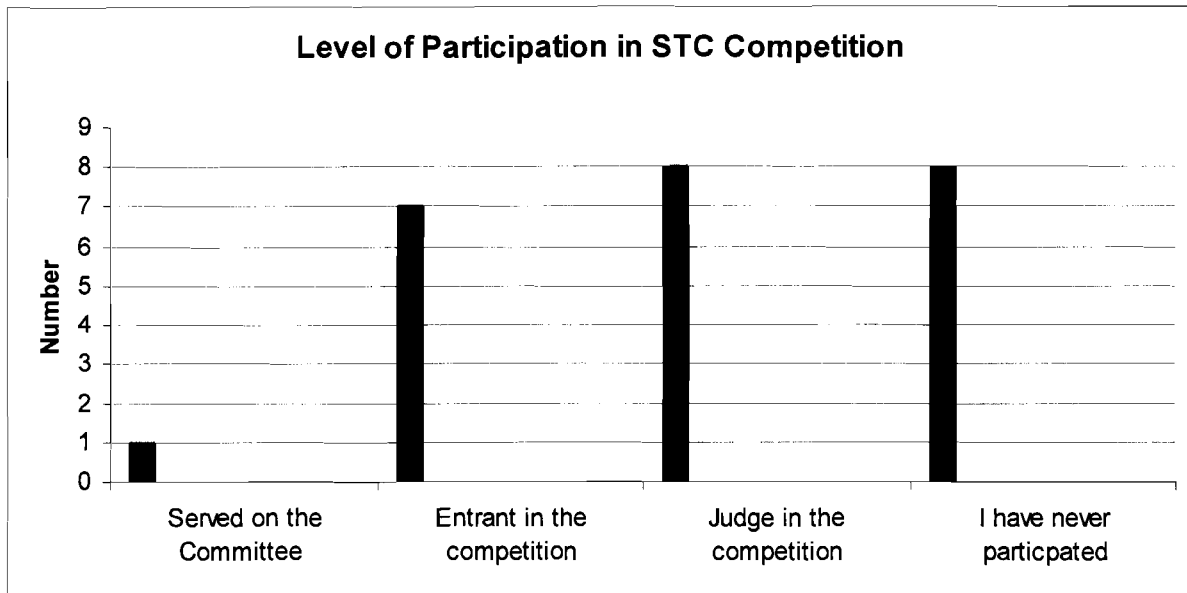


Figure 3. Participation in the STC publication competitions

Question 9: Have you attended any of the Webinars offered in the Twin Cities Chapter in the last two years?

A resounding 78% (n = 14) of the respondents indicated that they had not attended Webinars in the last two years. Four of the respondents had attended Webinars, and Figure 4 displays the comparison to attending Webinars and the relationship to distance traveled. Those traveling the shortest distance had attended a Webinar in the last two years.

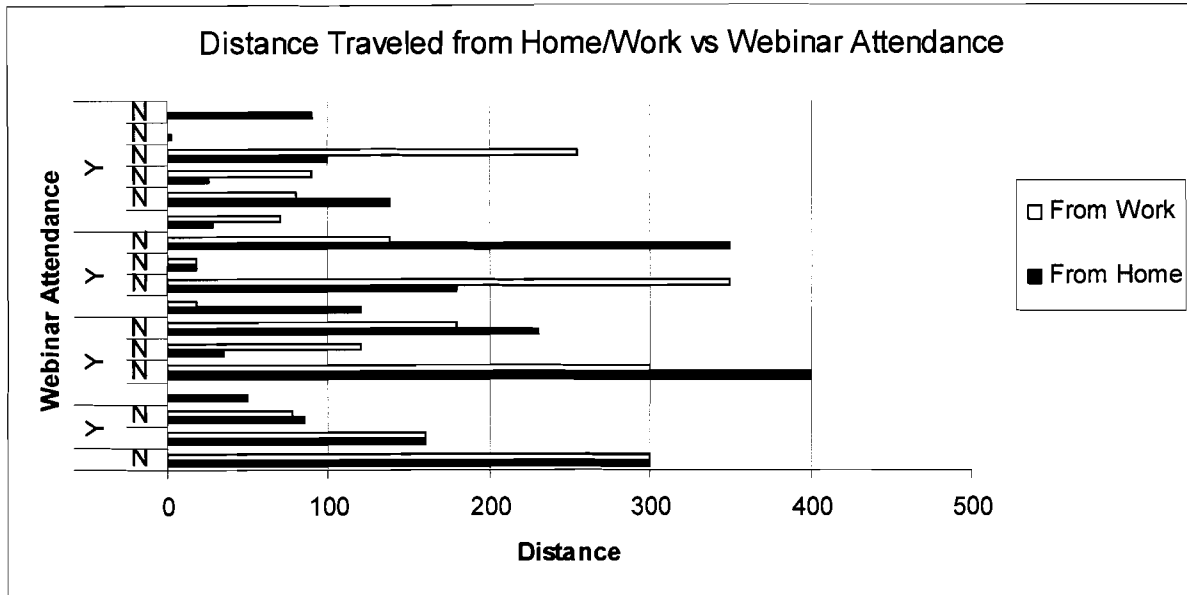


Figure 4. Relationship between Webinars attended and distance traveled.

Question 10: If you have attended Webinars offered through the Twin Cities Chapter in the last two years, please indicate your level of satisfaction.

Of the people responding to this question, only 22% (n = 4) were satisfied with Webinars and 44% (n = 8) were neutral in their level of satisfaction. Respondents made additional comments that reflected their answers to the survey, and there was no new information or insight provided.

Question 11: If you have not attended Webinars offered through the Twin Cities chapter, please rate the following reasons according to frequency: 1) always; 2) frequently; 3) sometimes; 4) seldom; 5) Never

The 14 respondents who had never attended Webinars answered this question. Of those responding to this question, 64% indicated that taking time away from work was a factor in not being able to attend Webinars, and 69% indicated that cost and travel were important factors in not being able to attend Webinars (see Table 3).

Table 3. Frequent Reasons for not attending Webinars

Reasons	Frequency					Total
	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	
Unable to take time from work	36% (5)	29% (4)	7% (1)	14% (2)	14% (2)	14
Cost of Webinar/ Travel	54% (7)	15% (2)	8% (1)	15% (2)	8% (1)	13
Webinar Location	23% (3)	0% (0)	31% (4)	23% (3)	23% (3)	13
Topic not Relevant	0% (0)	29% (4)	64% (9)	0% (0)	7% (1)	14
Distance is an issue	17% (2)	25% (3)	8% (1)	17% (2)	33% (4)	12
I am not aware that Webinars are available	0% (0)	15% (2)	15% (2)	23% (3)	46% (6)	13

Question 12: If Programs, seminars, or workshops were accessible to you without traveling to one common location, how likely would you be to participate?

Seventy-two percent (n = 13) of the respondents indicated that they would likely or very likely attend activities if they did not have to travel. Of the remaining respondents, 17% (n = 3) remained neutral, and 11% (n = 2) indicated they were unlikely to attend activities even if they did not have to travel.

Question 13: If certificates were offered to attend Workshops or Seminars, how likely is it that you would attend?

The purpose of this question was to determine if a reward system would encourage members at a distance to attend activities. Thirty-three percent (n = 6) indicated that they

would likely attend activities if certificates were offered; 50% (n = 9) were neutral, and 16% (n = 3) were unlikely to attend activities even if a certificate was offered.

Question 14: How interested would you be in attending virtual meetings or other professional development activities (Webstreaming/Webex, teleconferences) from your location of choice if the technology was available?

This is one of the most important questions on the survey: what would members do if they had the opportunity to do something high tech? Of all the respondents, 77% (n = 14) indicated they would probably or definitely attend virtual meetings or professional development activities if the technology was available. Only 6 % (n = 1) was neutral, but 17% (n = 3) answered that it was unlikely they would attend virtual meetings.

Question 15: If you could make 3 improvements in the educational/professional development offerings from the chapter, what would you suggest?

Answers to this question provided a way for members to have a say in how professional development opportunities are provided to them. Due to the length of the responses, this paragraph will contain a brief summary to represent the comments. For the full response text, see Appendix C, Question 15.

Members want to participate in professional opportunities, but sometimes workshops and seminars are too expensive, or the content is at beginner level; some members need an intermediate level of information. Members would like to see more communication about what is offered and about upcoming events. One member stated that the survey was the first contact experienced in over one year. Members would like to see more information about educational opportunities, certifications, and online programs. They want more opportunities to use online technology to continue their professional development. One respondent made an

excellent point in saying that the Twin Cities chapter takes the summer off; however, technical communicators still need professional development.

Question 16: Please indicate your age range.

See Figure 5 for a display of age range.

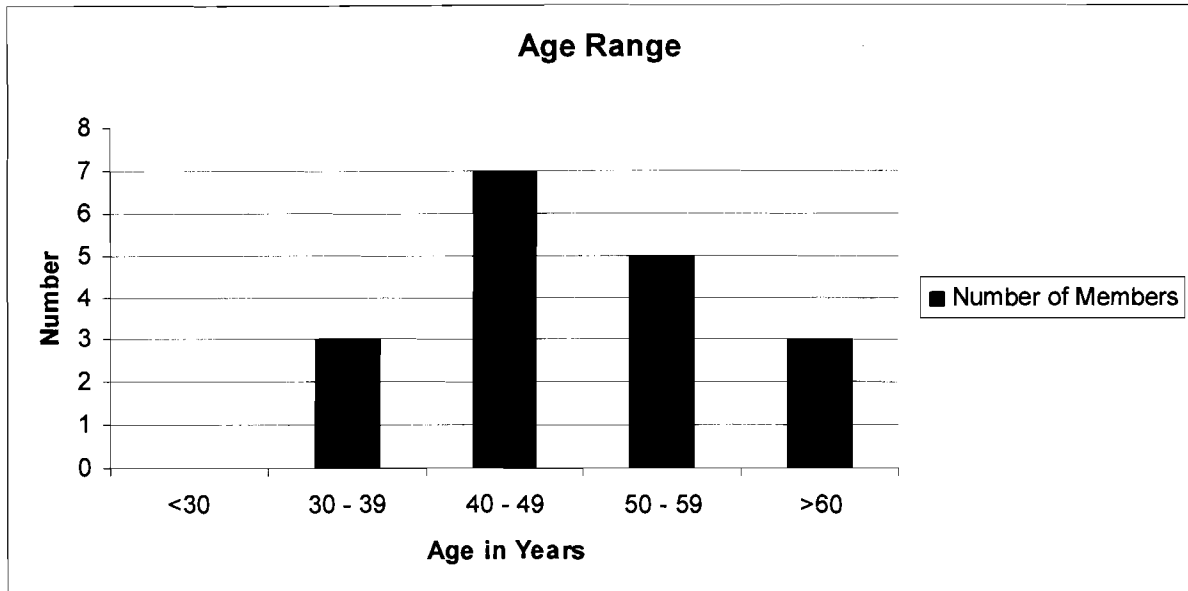


Figure 5. Age range of all respondents

Question 17: Please indicate your highest level of education.

This is reported as a cumulative value. At least 94% of the respondents hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

Question 18: How many years have you been in the field of Technical Communication? (This encompasses technical writing, medical writing, editing, documentation specialist, Web design/development, On-line help, etc.)

A histogram of the range of years in Technical Communication is presented in Figure 6. On average, those who responded have been in the Technical Communication field for 17 years

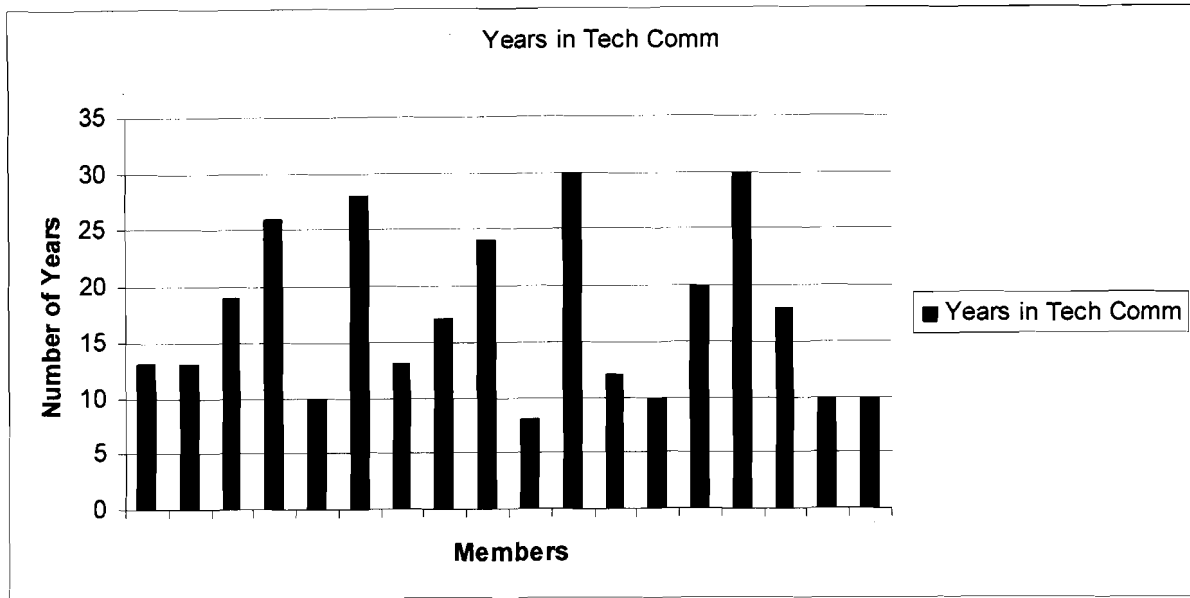


Figure 6. Number of years in the Technical Communication field

Question19: How many years have you been a member of the Society for Technical Communication?

Answers to this question ranged from 2 years to 30 years. The average number of years respondents have been a member of STC is 12.6 years (see Figure 7).

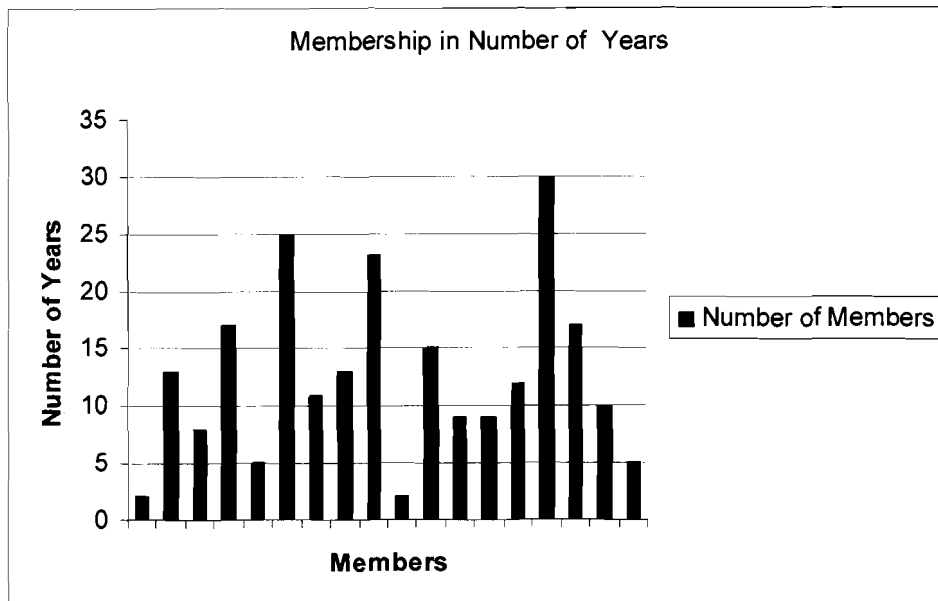


Figure 7. Number of years in STC

Figure 8 is a combined scatter plot to show the number of years in the field of Technical Communication in combination with the number of years in STC membership.

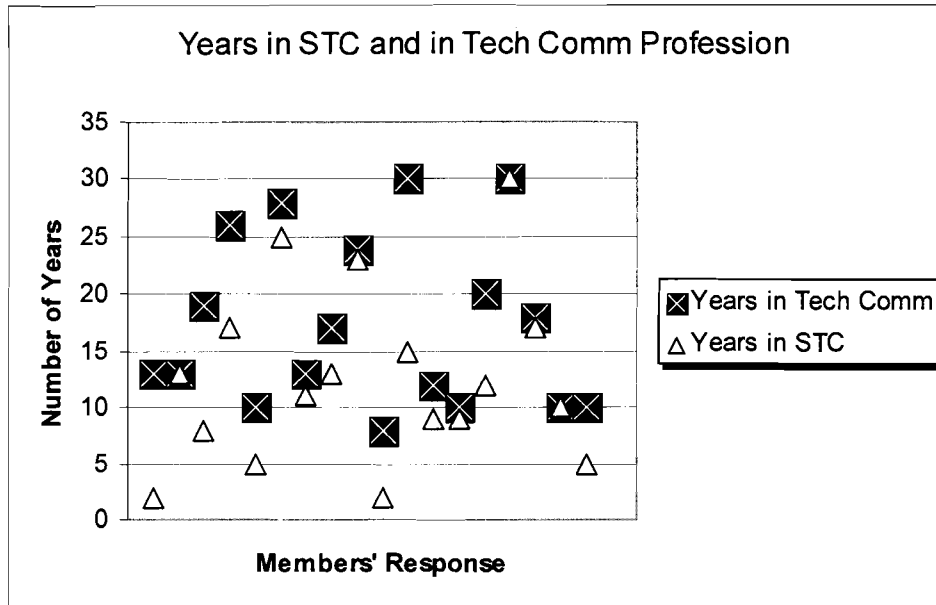


Figure 8. Number of years in the profession and STC organization

Question 20: The Twin Cities Chapter year is from July 1 to June 30, and the chapter conducts 10 meetings a year from September to June. How many times a year do you attend the regularly-scheduled monthly meetings?

Of those responding, 77% (n = 14) attend less than 2 meetings a year; 44% (n = 8) do not attend any meetings. A cross-check with question 1 (distance traveled to a meeting), shows that those who do not attend the meetings are living the farthest distance from the meeting venue: up to 400 miles from the Twin Cities.

Chapter V: Discussion

This needs assessment was conducted to address the problem of providing professional development opportunities to STC members who live approximately 20 miles from the Minneapolis meeting venue.

Limitations

Other than scheduling the survey for pilot tests, there was no validation procedure put into place. After the survey was distributed, it occurred to the researcher that motivation plays a big role in how much effort members will put forth regarding helping themselves with respect to professional development. Having data regarding volunteerism and motivation may have had an effect on the results and final conclusions. Six surveys were discarded because respondents indicated they lived within a few miles (e.g., 2 mile) within the meeting venue. It is possible that those who received surveys had either moved from the addresses that were provided to the researcher through the Society for Technical Communication international headquarters.

Conclusions

The STC Twin Cities chapter offers many professional development activities, but may lack delivery methods that would reach distance members and satisfy their needs for professional development. The study was important because no one has ever asked the distance members how they felt about professional development opportunities and their ability to access them easily.

Though the number of respondents was low in this survey, those who did respond provided good information and insight to what they want from the organization. They are educated professionals who have been in the technical communication business an average of

17 years and members of the STC organization an average of 12 years. From their years of experience in the profession and in the organization, their input is valuable to solving the problem of providing professional development opportunities to distance members.

Distance is indeed a factor in pursuing professional development activities. However, despite distance issues, respondents had participated in chapter events, though very few had volunteered in the activities. Respondents to this study indicated that they want more communication from the Twin Cities chapter and suggest it can be done via the newsletter (revived fall 2006) and proactively advertising planned activities. There is also indication that respondents are willing to participate in distance activities using virtual technology. As Cervero (2000) indicated, "...professional associations are active and important providers, with an increasing number of programs being offered in distance education formats" (p. 4). As identified in the literature review, the society transformation has addressed distance education formats and is bringing that to the forefront of its educational focus.

With that said, though, respondents were neutral regarding the Webinars already offered through the society, and they indicated that cost was a factor in not participating. It would be beneficial to examine the Webinar topics and calculate the delivery costs to determine gaps in what the membership wants and what is actually delivered.

Though the Twin Cities chapter offered Webinars on a regular basis, many respondents were not aware of this offering. STC stands for the Society of Technical *Communication*; but if people are not aware of certain activities, this brings up the question of whether or not there is a communication gap. All but two of the respondents indicated they had high speed Internet access, pointing to the possibility of offering more opportunities via the Web and putting an effort into robust advertising.

Further research is needed into the feasibility of investing in newer technologies that offer effective delivery methods.

Recommendations

Although the response number was low, there is indication that the Twin Cities chapter needs to move in a direction where programs and professional development activities are available to all members, equally; all members benefit from using new technologies. At the society level, there is also dedicated Educational Committee devoted to professional development; this is a model and resource for all chapters and could greatly benefit members who consistently seek opportunities to enhance their careers.

Recommendations from this needs assessment include the following:

1. Create an Educational Committee in the chapter to develop a professional development program with capabilities for distance delivery.
2. Investigate and implement new technologies for delivering programs; provide training for using the technology.
3. Survey the Twin Cities' chapter members regarding volunteerism and motivation. (If the members are not motivated, they will not participate regardless of what is offered.)
4. Benchmark with other chapters to learn "best practices" and adapt methods to meet the distance members' needs for professional development.
5. Develop sub-chapters where a cluster of members exist.
6. Conduct annual satisfaction surveys to help ensure continuous improvement.

At the society level, the transformation effort is important and if the Twin Cities chapter can implement the recommendations, then members will have optimal opportunities for continuous professional development.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Results of Focus Group discussion 27 February 2006

Gathering information to develop Survey questions for STC-TC distance members.

Discussion captured on a SmartBoard.

Question/Topic 1.

STC members are considered members of communities—people sharing interests, activities, and initiatives; where communication is frequent and there are benefits to the association.

What professional development opportunities (value) do we offer the members of the Twin Cities community?

Answer

Participation opportunities (opportunity to participate is a value to the participant)

- Job Exchange

- Competitions (judging, comments from entering, managing the competitions, and general management, training judges)

- Leadership opportunities

Networking

Entrance into society level activities (including the annual conference, judging, be on nomination committee)

Educational opportunities

- Publications: InterCom Magazine, TechCom Journal—sometimes people just want the publications

- National conference for attending and if you present at a session at the conference

- Meetings

- Workshops

- New information regarding usability

- Specialty for vision impaired—accessibility to information when people are vision impaired. (Ginny Reddish coming in May)

- Program development—huge development opportunity; contacting people, planning the programming, scheduling, coordinating, budget concerns, sorting through opinions.

- Publicity committee/Marketing: trying to attract people to events, market the value of the events.

- Public Outreach—PR person at the awards banquet

- Contact through the governor and mayor—shy volunteers have to reach out to visible people

- Educating the public on what STC is. Could publicize our existence.

- Partnering with other associations—value in membership (ISPI, ASTD, etc.)—reduced rates to either members for programs

- Students doing research—contact other international chapters to learn about what they do. Transalpine (France, Italy, Germany), India.

- Engaged in Literacy campaign (donated books to JJ Hill library) Colleges could donate books

Happy Hours—Usability (small group)

Mentoring (1:1)

(Networking) Call employers (job exchange) and ask how we can benefit them, how to make it easy to hire a tech Comm.. Person. Recommend people for jobs.

Resume posting service.

Workshop opportunities—but we do not give certificates for attending

Used to have certificate for International SIG (3/4 meetings, person rec'd certificate)

(Marj values hers)

Used to have Medical Writing SIG

(AIA—architect org, has requirement for certain amount of points)

Phone seminars (no longer holding those,)—but did not make money

Door prizes at meetings

Webinars (costly, not timely for working people) If worthwhile, OK, but could be risky if not.

Question/Topic 2

How does the Twin Cities community market these opportunities to the members?

Answer

Website

Mass e-mail

International publications

Invitation to annual Awards Banquet

TechTalk (newsletter of Twin Cities, chapter, out of circulation currently)—was good—(not current)

Flyers for people who attend meetings

Could create a Blog (contact new webmaster person) (For future questions)

Personal networking

Hired PR consultant

Friends who encourage us to join—the student joined for credit, then convinced Beth to join.

Advertising through school (U of MN) listserv, bulletin boards, affiliation with U of MN, which adds credibility. Only 2 professors belong now.

Publications when people join (brochures in new member packet, tips on how to make good use of STC)—new tool

Competition is good marketing tool

Publicity manager (gubernatorial proclamation)—this was publicized

Members that write articles (some published in InterCom)

If not a member, where would one hear about our chapter

Textbooks often quote STC publications—ethics standards, references at end of chapters, so a student's first introduction [to STC]

Question/Topic 3

Think of some new professional development opportunities that could be offered to members of the Twin Cities community.

Answer

Reinstitute SIGS—at
 WebEx/Webcasts,
 STC Radio Hour (be on NPR)
 Tap society for technology—whatever STC offers, asks to use it, borrow it
 Cable TV show
 Members Only functions on the Website (restricted on the local level, it is at the international)
 Virtual meetings
 Virtual Happy Hours—
 Increase social opportunities because some people do not come to meetings (42% do not attend meeting, they are passive members)
 International conference in Twin Cities, so will advertise that—hospitality tours, daily newsletter, where one can go within 10 minute walking distance,
 50th birthday party of Twin Cities chapter
 Focus on professional development opportunity
 Need more seminars (tools seminar, skills enhancements – like the speakers bureau, leadership committee, and e-learning for chapter leaders) First modules will be rolled out at the conference.
 The environment matters—people bring their own laptop, wifi wired, and we could learn as a team; have a wireless feature to meetings
 Outreach that brings in new blood.
 Advertise about the people who participate (advertise the focus group, and any events that are happening but not necessarily) Report of activities (chapter history files—8 people went through that and it was talked about at banquet)
 Write articles
 Acknowledge small groups
 Access to information—organized
 “Dear Techies” or Tech tips: similar to Tech-Whirler. Israel has one. Threads of listserv that has good tips and answers to troubleshooting.

Question/Topic 4

How can we deliver professional development opportunities to members of the community so that each member has easy access? (What new technologies can we incorporate to deliver opportunities to each member?)

Answer

The international society has a whole technology team. Use the chapter leadership to request what we need.

Provide something on cell phones:

Chapter Laptop to use for WIFI and pull things down from the society (for meetings) and would go from pres. To pres. Secretary could use during the meetings.

Could record WebEx and record it, then play it back (web streaming)

Website redevelopment

Software through Breeze, Breeze meetings, LiveMeeting,

Have information put in member's calendar (activities populate dates on calendars)

Web Blog

Web redevelopment reaches 3 audiences: Tech comm. Prof., students, (members and non members) and orgs needing tech com services-reorganizing the site for accessibility, restructuring

Reorg the cite through accessibility

How do we help people who are blind/deaf?

Software that reads out loud to user (blind members)

Cascading style sheets—so only reading content.

Use Dreamweaver for the website.

Technical library—virtual bookshelf especially things written by members (International has a search tool for publications)

RSS Feed and link to the Society pages – do through local chapter website so you do not

Discounts on STC publications (as benefit of membership)

Insurance through the organization

Question 5

What could prevent the Twin Cities community from using the technologies mentioned?

Answer

Lack of computer equipment, lack of skill in using

Lack of money

Lack of bandwidth

Need someone skilled in technology (training issue)

Webinars are not cost effective—lack of money

Use a “trailer” from Webinars to be a teaser (this is not a hindrance)

Webinar content is unknown, vendors are too promotional

Lack of choice of time/day

Webinars are unavailable to broader membership after the session is over.

Need to know how long something will take

Privacy to view anything on screen

Money

Location

Economics

Computer space, bandwidth

Making members aware/lack of training in technologies

Requires volunteers to coordinate

Need technical support for some of the technology

Lack of a technology support system (need training)

Negativity, bad press (badmouthing us), oppressive (nay sayers)—resistant to change

Factor of change, fear of change

Perceptions of tight cliques

People do not know one another

The chapter has to be continually changing our technology and tools to offer members the latest in technologies and tools.

Chapter needs to provide more creative outlets so we are not doing the same old same old.

Website is stogy place right now, needs so much updating.

Stagnation

Wrap Up—any additional things we missed

Chapter needs to be on cutting edge of technology.

ASTD always on top of things. They hired a PR place—a professional association consulting firm. Meeting planners now run ASTD.

STC information is very in depth compared to ASTD and AMWA.

The organization keeps abreast o

Offer internship credits to students for doing things within STC.

Have competent leaders

Start/finish meetings on time (especially for lunchtime meetings)

Well-run meetings

SME directory (webpage)—where members can go for help. Problem would be having to update it.

Train members about the forum.

Wikipedia

RSS Feed is available for forum members

Need a link to that forum from our chapter website.

Categories for answers:

Values the chapter provides:

Leadership opportunities

- Lead committees-arrangements, programs, special occasion activities (for conferences (there must be 20 opportunities within the chapter), Present at meetings (chapter, regional, or international level)
- Run for office

Educational opportunities

- Meetings
- Workshops
- SIGS (offer very few right now)
- Publicizing STC
- Partnering with other organizations (ISPI, AMWA)
- Phone seminars (Webinars)—but they are not timely or affordable

Appendix B: Survey Tool

The survey tool was originally developed as an MS Word document and then transferred into the online survey tool.

Survey to Determine Professional Development Needs of Distance Members

This project has been reviewed by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 part 46. Thank you for taking the time to respond to this 15-minute survey. You have been selected to take this survey because you have been identified as a Twin Cities STC Chapter member who lives at a distance (approx. 20 miles) from the Minneapolis meeting location. You might be wondering how answering this survey benefits you. The results from the information will influence the decisions about programs and other benefits offered through the Twin Cities chapter. Results from the survey will be analyzed and published as a research report. Because this survey constitutes research, it is necessary to obtain your informed consent. Your voluntary responses and submission imply that the researcher has your permission to analyze responses and to publicize the results in a research paper. All answers will be held in confidence; no names will be associated with returned surveys, nor will any names appear in the research report. When you have answered all the questions, click the "Done" button. If you have any questions, please e-mail Lynda Shindley at lyndas@sherbttel.net. As appreciation for answering this survey, there will be a drawing at the October 13, 2006 meeting for a \$50.00 gift certificate to Barnes and Noble. If you have submitted this survey and want to enter the drawing, please send a separate e-mail with your name and mailing address to DKLevander@aol.com (Deanne Levander). Please use "October 13 Drawing" in the subject line.

- 1 On average, how many miles do you travel to attend chapter meetings or events?
Please specify _____ miles.
- 2 To what extent is distance the deciding factor attending Twin Cities chapter activities (meetings, workshops, Webinars)?
a. ☐ Very significant b. ☐ Significant c. ☐ Neutral d. ☐ Insignificant. ☐ Very Insig.
- 3 Do you have high speed access to the Internet?
a. ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 4 Please check all of the following growth and development activities in which you may have participated. Please check all that apply.

a. Monthly programs	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Never participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (non-leadership role)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (leadership Role)	<input type="checkbox"/> Need more information	
b. Job Exchange	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Never participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (non-leadership role)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (leadership Role)	<input type="checkbox"/> Need more information	
c. Newsletter	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Never participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (non-leadership role)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (leadership Role)	<input type="checkbox"/> Need more information	
d. Publication Competition	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Never participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (non-leadership role)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (leadership Role)	<input type="checkbox"/> Need more information	
e. Yearly Awards Banquet	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Never participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (non-leadership role)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (leadership Role)	<input type="checkbox"/> Need more information	
f. Website	<input type="checkbox"/> Participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Never participated	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (non-leadership role)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer (leadership Role)	<input type="checkbox"/> Need more information	

- g. Special Interest Groups ☐ Participated ☐ Never participated ☐ Volunteer (non-leadership role)
☐ Volunteer (leadership Role) ☐ Need more information ☐
- h. Webinars ☐ Participated ☐ Never participated ☐ Volunteer (non-leadership role)
☐ Volunteer (leadership Role) ☐ Need more information ☐
- i. STC Phone Seminars ☐ Participated ☐ Never participated ☐ Volunteer (non-leadership role)
☐ Volunteer (leadership Role) ☐ Need more information ☐
- j. Seminars/Workshops ☐ Participated ☐ Never participated ☐ Volunteer (non-leadership role)
☐ Volunteer (leadership Role) ☐ Need more information ☐
- k. Networking ☐ Participated ☐ Never participated ☐ Volunteer (non-leadership role)
☐ Volunteer (leadership Role) ☐ Need more information ☐
- l. Membership Drive ☐ Participated ☐ Never participated ☐ Volunteer (non-leadership role)
☐ Volunteer (leadership Role) ☐ Need more information ☐

5 Please indicate your level of satisfaction for each of the following professional development opportunities and services offered in the chapter.

- a. Monthly programs ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- b. Newsletter ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- c. Publication Competition ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- d. Website ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- e. Special Interest Groups ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- f. Webinars ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- g. STC Phone Seminars ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- h. Seminars/Workshops ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- i. Networking ☐ Very Satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral
☐ Dissatisfied ☐ Very Dissatisfied

Educational Opportunities: The Society for Technical Communication is classified as an educational organization. The following questions and statements are meant to elicit your feelings and needs regarding educational opportunities in the Twin Cities chapter.

- 6 Check all of the determining factors that are important reasons (to you) for belonging to the Twin Cities chapter (check all that apply).
- a. ☐ Programs (monthly meetings)
 - b. ☐ Workshops/Seminars
 - c. ☐ Leadership opportunities
 - d. ☐ Professional development
 - e. ☐ Networking
 - f. ☐ Special Interest Groups
 - g. ☐ Membership enhances the resume
 - h. ☐ Place of employment pays for membership
 - i. ☐ Other—Please specify
- 7 Are you aware of the Twin Cities annual Publication Competition?
- a. ☐ Yes b. ☐ No
- 8 Indicate how you have participated in the Publication Competition (check all that apply):
- a. ☐ Entrant in the Competition
 - b. ☐ Judge in the Competition
 - c. ☐ Served on the Publication Competition Committee
 - d. ☐ I have never participated
- 9 Have you attended any of the Webinars offered through the Twin Cities Chapter in the last two years?
- a. ☐ Yes
- b. ☐ No
- 10 If you have attended Webinars offered through the Twin Cities Chapter in the last two years, please check your level of satisfaction.
- a. ☐ Very Satisfied b. ☐ Satisfied c. ☐ Neutral d. ☐ Dissatisfied e. ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- You may comment regarding your level of satisfaction.
- 11 If you have not attended Webinars offered through the Twin Cities chapter, please rate the following reasons according to frequency: 1) always; 2) frequently; 3) sometimes; 4) seldom; 5) Never
- | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to take time from work | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| b. <input type="checkbox"/> Cost | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| c. <input type="checkbox"/> Webinar location | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| d. <input type="checkbox"/> Topic not relevant | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| e. <input type="checkbox"/> Distance is an issue | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| f. <input type="checkbox"/> I am not aware that Webinars are available | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| g. <input type="checkbox"/> Other Reasons | | | | | |

- 12 If Programs were accessible to you without traveling to one common location, how likely would you be to attend?
a. ☐ Very likely b. ☐ Likely c. Not sure d. Not Likely e. Not at all
- 13 If certificates were offered to attend Workshops or Seminars, how likely is it that you would attend?
a. ☐ Very likely b. ☐ Likely c. Neutral d. Unlikely e. Very Unlikely
- 14 How interested would you be in attending virtual meetings or other professional development activities (Webstreaming/Webex, teleconferences) from your location of choice if the technology was available?
a. ☐ Definitely Yes b. ☐ Probably Yes c. ☐ Neutral d. ☐ Probably Not
e. ☐ Definitely Not
- 15 If you could make 3 improvements in the educational/professional development offerings from the chapter, what would you suggest?
Comments
- 16 Please indicate your age range:
a. ☐ <30
b. ☐ 30 – 39
c. ☐ 40 – 49
d. ☐ 50 – 59
e. ☐ >60
- 17 Please indicate your highest level of education.
a. ☐ Post-doctorate
b. ☐ PhD
c. ☐ Master's Degree
d. ☐ Bachelor's Degree
e. ☐ Associate's Degree
f. ☐ High School Diploma
- 18 How many years have you been in the field of technical communication?
Years
- 19 How many years have you been a member of the Society for Technical Communication?
Years
- 20 The Twin Cities Chapter year is from July 1 to June 30, and the chapter conducts 10 meetings a year from September to June. How many times a year do you attend the regularly-scheduled monthly meetings?
a. ☐ None b. ☐ 1 – 2 c. ☐ 3 – 4 d. ☐ 5 - 6 e. ☐ 7 – 8 f. ☐ 9 - 10

Appendix C: Respondents Comments to Specific Survey Questions

Question 6: Respondents could add additional reasons why it was important to be a member of STC. Statements provided here have not been edited.

1. STC-TC conferences
2. Keep finger on the pulse of the tech comm community
3. Comes as part of the national STC membership
4. job exchange
5. Newsletter
6. Technical Communication mag and Intercom
7. I am part of the group through my STC membership

Question 15: If you could make 3 improvements in the educational/professional development offerings from the chapter, what would you suggest?

The comments were exported out of the survey tool and have been left as the respondents wrote them.

1. More online opportunities
2. Class titles and descriptions need to be very specific. Our group has signed up for classes, thinking it was one thing, and it turned out to be something else or be at a very beginner level when we needed something more advanced.
1. Hold more offerings on Saturdays, when the distance doesn't mean taking a whole day off work.
(I love the educational offerings; I just wish I weren't so far away.)
4. - Focus on market opportunities and needs (I am a consultant)
- Focus on actual training on needed tools(Dreamweaver, Frame, Captivate, etc.)
- Cross pollinate with other professional orgs in TC area when possible
5. more advertising of events
6. keep up the good work

7. 1) You need to tell the members about the offerings that are available. Since they quit printing the newsletter, I hear absolutely nothing from the Twin Cities STC chapter. This is the first e-mail that I've gotten in about a year.

2) Remote access (or at least the ability to view the content after it was presented) would be helpful for distant members.

3) No third one comes to mind.

8. I don't participate enough, due to distance, to feel qualified to provide good input.

9. #1 - Time slots. The Friday lunch time meetings often sound interesting, but I can't justify 4 hours of travel time for a 1-2 hr meeting when the subject isn't of an immediate need to my company. If it's a subject I don't care to have my boss knowing about, I have to take vacation time. If these sessions were available via webex so I didn't have to travel, I'd be able to participate much easier.

#2 Communication of the meeting speakers, events. The email notices make it better for more highly publicized events, but any postcards or other mailings arrive too late to plan a trip, or arrive after the fact.

#3 The chapter and the chapter web site go on summer hiatus. My job and my educational needs don't. When 4 hrs of travel is involved, the winter weather is a big factor deciding to skip an otherwise interesting and beneficial speaker.

10. 1. More encouragement to schools (both HS and college level)

2. More beginning level and less costly seminars

3. More local SIGs

11. Too many of the presentations are old information. Some of them seem like advertising for the company the person works for.

12. More skills workshops, offer a certificate in a particular skill that is based on several workshops.

13. Topics for phone seminars are too elementary (for beginners)

Record monthly meetings for members to view as a webinar during work hours

For the one meeting I attended (several years ago), I felt out of place. It was very social and many groups were not welcoming. Was not worth taking time off of work to travel to. I would be more likely to listen and watch a webinar during work hours than to travel to Minneapolis for a Tuesday night monthly meeting.

14. No suggestions

15. (retired, losing touch with most chapter activities)

16. hands-on training of materials and methods (i.e. FrameMaker/WebWorks, Infomapping)

17. I would like to see more publications or links to publications on the web.

18. 1. I'm not certain that I'm only a newsletter mailing list...either electronically or snail. If I'm not, that would be beneficial to me.

2. More information on job opportunities.

3. More information on educational opportunities: certifications, online, programs